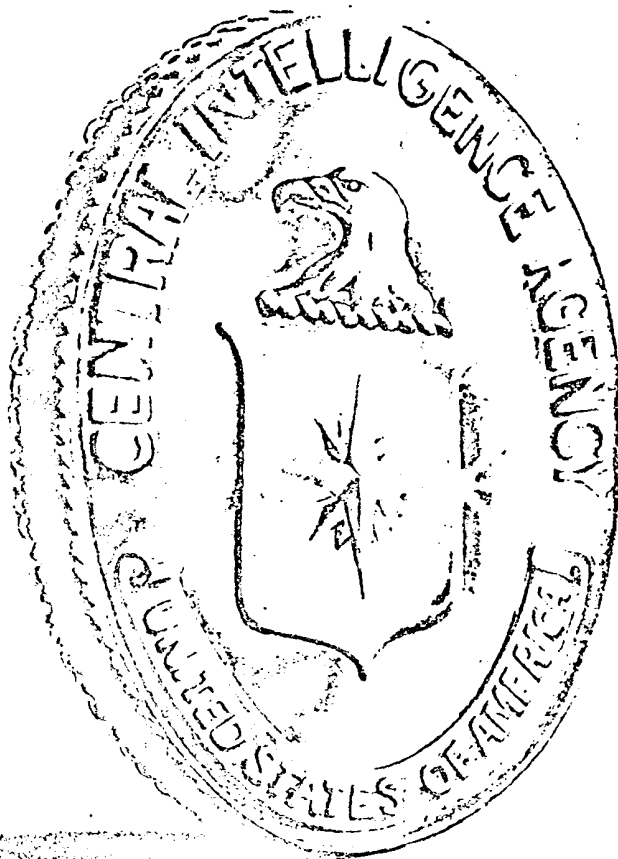


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Dark side up

Colby of C.I.A.—C.I.A. of Colby

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By David Wise

A few weeks ago, a Norwegian who had served in the anti-Nazi underground saw a newspaper photograph and thought he recognized an American O.S.S. officer he had worked with during the war and had known only as "No. 96."

The photograph was that of William Egan Colby, 53, a career covert operator for the Central Intelligence Agency, and chief of its supersecret Directorate of Operations, sometimes known as the "Department of Dirty Tricks." As part of the high-level game of musical chairs touched off by Watergate, President Nixon had just named Bill Colby to be head of the C.I.A.

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And there is an interesting fact about Colby in the files at C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va. His official C.I.A. biography relates that he served in the O.S.S. during World War II and contains this sentence: "Shortly before the end of the war in 1945, he led a team dropped in northern Norway to destroy a rail line used for transporting German reinforcements." The Norwegian man who read about Colby's appointment and thought he recognized his picture got in touch through an intermediary with an American woman who lives in Kensington, Md., and who is a close friend of the Colbys, particularly of Colby's wife, Barbara. Could the woman find out whether Colby was his old comrade in arms, No. 96?

"I tried to find out," the woman in Kensington told me. "And I'm still trying. Bill wouldn't say, and Barbara doesn't know, or at least she says she doesn't know."

The story illustrates something about Colby that should not be entirely surprising in a man who has spent most of his adult life as—well—a spy. A State Department official who had worked with Colby in Vietnam put it this way: "He's soft-spoken, with a casual style. He has a forthright manner, but there's also a private Bill Colby. He's a very private person."

Indeed, there are really two Bill Colbys; given his covert background there would almost have to be. There is William Egan Colby, the quiet, young "Foreign Service officer" in the American Embassy in Stockholm and Rome in the nineteen-fifties, who was simultaneously William Egan Colby of the C.I.A., an up-and-coming "black" (that is, secret) operator working in the C.I.A.'s Clandestine Services under State Department cover. Later, there was Bill Colby in Saigon in 1959, listed in the official Biographic Register of the Department of State as a "political officer," and later as "first secretary" of the embassy. In fact, he became Saigon station chief for "the Agency" during this period. Then, in 1962, he turned up at Langley as chief of the Far East Division of C.I.A.'s covert side.

There was Bill Colby back in Vietnam again in 1968, heading the "pacification" program, building roads and schools and performing good works. There was also Bill Colby who supervised the Phoenix program, designed to "neutralize" the Vietcong, which its critics have charged was a program of systematic assassination, murder and torture—an accusation that Colby has vigorously denied, under oath. According to figures Colby provided to a House subcommittee in 1971, however, the Phoenix program killed 20,587 persons between 1968 and May, 1971. That's right: 20,587.

Now there is, Bill Colby in 1973, a devoted family man, a good husband and father of four children, a devout Roman Catholic who regularly attends mass at the Little Flower Roman Catholic Church in Bethesda, Md., and who lives in an unpretentious white-brick house in Springfield, Md., a Washington suburb that is not as fancy as, say, Chevy Chase. Bill Colby? Why, he was neighborhood chairman of the Boy Scouts.

"Bill's always been involved in the Boy Scouts," his wife said. Had he actually been one? "He was a Boy Scout in China when his father was assigned there as an Army officer."

It is a long way from the Boy Scouts to the C.I.A.'s Directorate of Operations, a euphemism that encompasses "dirty tricks," although perhaps there are some similarities, too, if one is to judge by the activities and style of E. Howard Hunt Jr., the most famous recent graduate (if he did graduate) of the C.I.A.'s covert division.

As the agency's Deputy Director for Operations, Colby—when tapped by Nixon to be C.I.A. chief—was the man directly in charge of America's global espionage and dirty tricks. C.I.A. is a bivalent: one half, the Directorate of Operations, collects information and engages in secret political operations. These are the spooks. The other half, the Directorate of Intelligence, staffed by scholarly types, analyzes

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